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The Russian Tragedy

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PHYSICALLY, Russia covers over one-seventh of the surface of the earth, but in thought present-day Russia has come to cover the whole world. The Russian problem is fundamental and elemental, and its roots are deep struck and in all directions in our modern life.

The Russia of today is not interesting chiefly because of its art or quaint customs, its embroidery or church music, but because it is a seismograph of political and social movements, on whose dial in great sweeps of the needle can be observed indications of what are still only faint rumblings in other places. Again, Russia is a social laboratory in which vivisection is practiced with a vengeance. Russia is offering up a vicarious sacrifice for the benefit and instruction of us all, and we can hardly stand by coldly or without sympathy and see this sacrifice made.

It is very difficult for the American here at home to encompass the Russian problem. It is so huge and so new that more time is needed to get the full perspective. Russia has not been a popular subject in the past, and most students lack the absolutely essential background to consider the subject. Newspaper accounts have been fragmentary, which is by no means to say that all newspaper accounts, as is frequently stated, are untruthful. As an eyewitness, I can say that, in spite of error and exaggeration, the general tenor of these accounts, which picture the conditions in Russia as very bad, is correct.

Of the Americans who were in Russia before and during the revolutionary period, most were idealists and well-wishers of the country; few, however, had the necessary equipment to study a situation where political and social phenomena have taken place at such rapid speed; and there have been, therefore, many inaccurate observers and, worse still, false teachers. So much of the discussion about Russia is not about Russia at all, but about political and social fundamentals, which the Russian situation

has brought to light, between people who differ beyond the possibility of compromise in their political and social conceptions, and each of whom hopes to see in Russia the vindication of his view. The constructive purpose of this paper is to try to discover some logic in all the tangle of ideas and give you, if possible, foundation and materials for your own further study and thinking.

In doing this, I assume that I am writing as a student for students and as a liberal for liberals. By liberals I mean those who have an open mind, a profound consciousness of their social obligation and a sense of values too profound to permit them to cast lightly away the old until the new has been tested. With such an equipment one can attack the Russian problem. I cannot forbear to say, as one who cherishes an affection for Russia, that she needs friends, and especially American friends. She needs sentiment of the best kind, but she does not need sentimentalism. The appeal of Russia is of such dimensions that it approximates a religious experience. However, there are varieties of religious experience, and emotionalism is not the best variety. Many well intentioned people, or adventurous people, seem to feel that when they approach the Russian problem they abandon all their former standards. This is an absolute mistake. Russia is not an exception in human nature; rather the Russian people are the most profoundly and intensely human that I have ever seen.

Now Russia is a tragedy, and America and the Anglo-Saxon world a comedy. We play the game to win, but to be beaten before you start has been the perspective that has faced Russians for centuries. This vein runs through all their literature. As an instance, recently a conference class in English literature at the University of Toronto was discussing Matthew Arnold's definition of poetry, in which he said it must be pleasing (doubtless in form and style). A Russian girl student in that class rose excitedly and said, "That definition is untrue. Poetry is literature, literature depicts life, and life is not pleasing."

From the economist's viewpoint, Russia is a natural tragedy, because of three great factors: (a) Its isolation from the rest of Europe, (b) its vastness and unprotectedness against Asiatic raids, (c) its harsh climate. It is impossible to discuss the present and future of Russia without knowing something of the past.

The three factors of the natural tragedy enumerated above finally brought about the consummation of the autocracy three hundred years ago. The people accepted this autocracy because they preferred it to anarchy and famine. Presently to that autocracy was added serfdom—analogue to the slavery of our colored people of the South—which lasted until the year of 1861, the year of our own Civil war. By serfdom nine-tenths of the population were bound to the land on which they were born, to be bought and sold with it.

THE TWO GREAT CLASSES

The great result of all this was to divide the Russian people into two classes, an upper one-tenth and a submerged nine-tenths, with a chasm between. Again from the economist's point of view, education and, hence production, were so backward in Russia that there was simply not enough produced to maintain much more than one-tenth on the scale of living which we have come to demand as normal. The upper tenth was composed primarily of the city dwellers, nobility, bureaucrats, professional classes, industrials and merchants. These look toward Western Europe; they often speak several languages. I have known cases amongst the wealthy where the children spoke French better than Russian; they are versatile, attractive, but as a class unsound, because out of touch with the main body of their own people. I venture to say that, generally speaking, no class of people in a country is ever superior to or can separate itself from the accomplishment of the country as a whole without hurting itself; and the quasi-mediæval conditions in Russia, persisting because of the backwardness of the country, had an unfortunate effect on the upper classes. The lower nine-tenths was composed of peasants in the country and their relatives who had come into the city to work in the factories. They were living for the most part as did the peasants in Western Europe two hundred years ago, undernourished and 90 per cent illiterate.

The spectacle of the profound difference between the two great classes, of the backwardness which prevailed among the nine-tenths, and the tyranny which held the whole structure together, was the tragedy of Russia. This tragedy has produced the passive Christian virtues in which the Russians excel—pity, generosity,

tolerance, human kindness, as well as a feeling that many have of living in eternity, that, since this life is not worth very much, they must turn to the prospect of another. But the tragedy has also produced the fundamental Russian faults: inertia and lack of initiative and decision.

THE INTELLIGENTZIA

Autocracy, using the bureaucracy as an instrument of government and excluding even most of the upper one-tenth from participating in it, has not given the people an opportunity to train in democracy, and has helped to bring about radicalism, which is the dominant note in Russian political life and will remain so until the harsh economic situation is improved. From the tragedy sprang also the "intelligenzia"—a portion of the upper one-tenth, profoundly conscious of their social obligation and trying to bridge the gap between the upper one-tenth and the lower nine-tenths. The faults of this class are well known. Circumstances made of them theorists, because they were denied opportunity for constructive efforts and participation in political life. They also suffered from the mentality of protest, the mentality which grows so accustomed to fighting certain evils that it has no plans for the time when these evils shall have been removed. Nevertheless, the intelligenzia has contained some of the noblest souls and most heroic strugglers for liberty of all time.

THE RUSSIAN PEASANT

As an offshoot of radical thought in Russia, it was most natural that socialism should be imported from Western Europe and that the labor movement of Russia should be under the socialist flag. Of course, political activity in Russia is always more or less on the edges and goes quite over the heads of the great mass of the people, who are the least known and the hardest to encompass, that is, the great mass of the peasantry. It is impossible to get a clear expression of opinion on political questions from the amorphous mass, because of its inaccessibility, due to insufficient communication, and because of its illiteracy and the limitations of its life experience. The Russian peasant is fundamentally of sound white stock and is bound to have a tremendous development. The war has had a great effect on him, but still he is essentially a

shrewd man with a very narrow horizon. The Russian peasant is an elemental man, with a character fundamentally good and kind, but like all such men, he can be aroused to passion by preaching and agitating, and in that passion he can strike and be tremendously cruel; and he has been.

THE MARCH REVOLUTION

In June of 1916 I arrived in Russia. I saw the manufacturing capacity of the country—never very large—concentrated on war production. I saw transportation—never sufficient, even before it had an army of millions of men to supply—overloaded. There was corruption in high places; there had been disaster at the front. The burden of war, while it drew out so many noble sacrifices from all classes of people, was, nevertheless, breaking down Russia's insufficient economic apparatus and intensifying political and social disturbances. With ample supplies of food in the south of Russia, hunger came to Petrograd and to Moscow because the food was not transported. Finally, with the flower of the professional army gone, just this hunger produced riots in Petrograd and pulled the hair trigger on the loaded gun; and the revolution of March was on.

On January 14, 1917, all the ambassadors in Petrograd and their staffs were presented to the Emperor at the New Year's reception at the Tsarskoe Selo. Two months afterward that same Emperor had abdicated for himself and his son, the Grand Duke Mikhail had refused to take the throne without a mandate from the Constituent Assembly, and the line of the executive authority was broken for the first time in three hundred years. The struggle for democracy was on.

THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT AND THE SOVIET

Then we ran through those memorable eight months, the eight months of effort at democracy, of conflict between the provisional government and the soviet. When the Romanov dynasty was cut off, the Duma, which was Russia's only parliament, formed a committee. This committee attempted to take affairs in hand and, in accord with the soviet of workmen's and soldiers' deputies, appointed the provisional government of Russia, of which Prince Lvov was the Premier and in which Alexander Kerensky, who later rose to fame, sat as Minister of Justice.

"Soviet" is merely the Russian word for "council," and the soviet was a labor organization, primarily formed in the cities and only afterwards extended to the peasants, for the reason that the latter are more inaccessible and not politically conscious, as has been explained above. The soviet is not an old institution in Russia, but had its birth in the revolution of 1905, when soviets of workmen were formed in all the chief cities. In the revolution of 1917 it also took in soldiers, a large part of whom were, of course, peasants, and finally it took in the peasants, who for a time had their own soviet. The soviet was socialistic, not bolshevistic, the Bolsheviki sitting in it as a small minority party, very active. The soviet organization did not aspire to govern, fearing to make a botch of government in such a crisis and discredit the cause of socialism. They sought to influence the provisional government, which was composed of *bourgeois*, i.e., not working people, with the exception of Kerensky, who was a member of the soviet. The leaders of the soviet were not rough workmen, but educated people, who had espoused the workmen's cause.

The chasm between the upper one-tenth and the lower nine-tenths immediately became evident between the provisional government and the soviet. This latter organization, in which there were so many restless spirits, desired to realize all manner of ideals instantly. There was no compromise, no team-work, because no one had ever been trained in democracy, and there was a very tremendous economic and military crisis which would have taxed the powers of any government to meet. Besides all this there was the constant work of the German spies, with which the country was filled, and of the bolshevist group using German money. This produced in eight months the downfall of the effort toward democracy in Russia.

BOLSHEVISM—ITS MEANING, METHODS, AND FAILURE

In November came the bolshevik coup d'état. *Bolshe* in Russian means "more"; *bolshevik* means a "maximalist," a man who stands for the maximum of a program, not the majority of the people, according to some misrepresentations. *Menshe* means "less," and the Mensheviki are the minimalists in the socialist movement. The Bolsheviki, whose chief spokesman is Lenin, have always taken the stand of the whole-hogger. In theory,

bolshevism is crude Marxian socialism by violence. Many of my Marxian friends deny this. The Berne Conference, by a large majority, repudiated bolshevism, but if you concede that they do in any degree strive toward socialist doctrines, then the great thing that distinguishes them from all other socialists is not their creed but their method, which is as old as the world. It is the method of "the end justifies the means," of personal opportunism, of absolute unscrupulousness. What they do is in the name, of course, of a great boon to be conferred on mankind. They are, like the Germans, wonderfully clever at using the basest side of human nature; they seem to know how to play on the meaner motives, such as cupidity. Lately the bolshevik propaganda organization in New York City, under the guise of commercial operations, has been offering American business men a bait of \$200,000,000 in gold. It was surprising the serious attention which this perfectly absurd, from a business point of view, organization received.

It is the philosophy of "the end justifies the means," the philosophy of class warfare and of the terror, with which democracy can never compromise. Our conflict with bolshevism is as fundamental as was our conflict with Germany. Karl Radek, writing in a bolshevik newspaper recently, made the issue plain, stating that now that the conflict between Wilson and the Kaiser was solved by the defeat of the latter, the struggle was on between Wilson and Lenin. The philosophy of "the end justifies the means" made it possible for the bolsheviks, although opposed to imperial Germany, to accept the tainted money of the Germans, and for the Germans to give the bolsheviks this money, although detesting them and their movement.

The theory of the Bolsheviki calls for the class war, and they remain in government by the exercise of the terror. The chief characteristic of this terror is not its physical side, which is merely Russian bestial nature let loose, but the fact that official proclamations prescribe it and justify it. In America the sanctity of the home is held very high, and stories of the nationalization of women in Russia have attracted disproportionate attention. Such nationalization seems to have taken place in a number of localities, but never upon the instructions of the central bolshevik government. What is more important to me is that Chicherin,

the bolshevik Commissary of Foreign Affairs, told one of my friends in Stockholm that the church and the home stood in the way of the progress of modern society and must be swept aside.

Terrible as the methods of the Bolsheviks have been, they might perhaps be condoned had they obtained for the proletariat, whose name they use so often, the benefits which they promised. They have not. Russia is today a desert place. The cities of Petrograd and Moscow are prison places. It is not that the streets flow daily with blood—executions take place at night or in quiet districts—but it is the deadly weight of oppression that weighs on everything, the total lack of production and of activity. Today the Russian proletariat are not behind this movement, because they are hungry and out of a job and have no freedom. The peasants are not behind it, because they have seen that taking the land by violence has made no just distribution and has brought them strife. There is class warfare even in the villages between rich and poor peasants—and the rich peasant would seem very poor to you. Bolshevism is immoral in theory and an utter failure in economic practice. The time is approaching rapidly when this group will pass, and America should aid every constructive Russian force which is contributing to this end. The reconstruction of Russia is particularly America's job; and there is no country which affords a greater field for the efforts of the spirit of service than Russia. No country draws on one so much. It is not sufficient to lend money or goods, but we shall have to lend ourselves, because there are too few brains per square mile. The Russian and the American character are very congenial.